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Chiefs Envision Soviet Missiles Close to Coasts

An ominous threat by Soviet Gen. Nikolai Chervov drew little public notice last week. But Chervov's warning that the Soviets might deploy submarines armed with nuclear missiles 100 miles off the U.S. coast was taken seriously by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Pentagon's alarm is understandable: Soviet submarines close to our shores could hit major U.S. targets—including Washington—with virtually no warning. And using a still-theoretical technique called "depressed trajectory," the subs could fire their nuclear missiles like artillery shells and hit targets well inland in six minutes or less.

This would give the United States little time to retaliate—or to determine whether it was a genuine Soviet attack, a false alarm or an accident. The time for a decision on whether to launch a global nuclear holocaust would be counted in seconds. There would be no opportunity for a president to weigh the available options, get on the hot line to Moscow—or even make it safely to his getaway plane.

The threat posed by close-to-shore Soviet subs lobbing nuclear bombs on the U.S. mainland is explained in frightening detail by the CIA and the Pentagon in top-secret documents seen by my associate Dale Van Atta.

The standard submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) flies a high trajectory up into space and down on its target thousands of miles away. The Soviets' existing missile subs are designed to launch missiles from their home ports or far out at sea. It takes high-trajectory missiles at least 15 minutes to reach their targets. Depressed-trajectory missiles would need a fraction of that.

The joint chiefs acknowledged this in a top-secret report to President Reagan, which warned that "[one] significant problem concerns the ability to inform [the president] of the origin and character of an SLBM attack in sufficient time to respond before missiles impact on Washington...."

Reagan took the warning seriously. He decided to move his "doomsday" command plane from suburban Washington to a site in Indiana. In the event of a Soviet submarine-based missile attack, he'd never make it the few miles to Andrews Air Force Base and be able to take off before the bomb went off. He'd have to stay in the White House bunker until it would be safe to fly to Indiana.

From the Kremlin's point of view, deploying subs close to the U.S. coasts is a reasonable response to the deployment of sophisticated Pershing II nuclear missiles close to Soviet borders.

The Soviets' Y-class submarines already present a formidable threat even in their normal patrol areas 1,300 to 1,600 miles offshore. The Defense Intelligence Agency reports that normally there are two Y-class subs on patrol off each coast, with a third in transit to or from the home port. Each carries 16 missiles, which can travel up to 3,000 kilometers (1,860 miles) and hit within 1,400 meters (seven-eighths of a mile) of their targets.